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Rapid Reflection Forces put to the reality test

Pierre Bérroux, Xavier Guilhou, and Patrick Lagadec outline how the Rapid Reflection Force concept – described in *CRJ* in 2006 – has now proved itself as a pivotal tool for EDF's senior management when they are confronted with risks and crises

IN 2006, THE AUTHORS LAID OUT A new concept for crisis leadership in *CRJ* which Électricité de France (EDF) was then just beginning to implement at the highest level: the Rapid Reflection Force (RRF). One year on, EDF's top management now systematically relies on it. It has proven to be a crucial platform for innovative networking dynamics inside and outside EDF, and has spurred the company to tackle the challenges of chaotic environments that characterise 21st century crises more effectively.

POSITIVE DYNAMICS

The RRF is a group that's task is to help the Chief Executive (CE) level grasp and confront issues raised by unconventional situations. It does so by developing equally unconventional responses when usual toolkits and references turn out to be irrelevant, or indeed dangerous. It aims to raise the right questions (rather than rely on ready-made answers), to flag pitfalls, to clarify new player networks, and to identify one (or two) critical initiative(s) that can trigger positive dynamics. In 2006, EDF implemented the RRF concept.

EDF had, of course, trained on many nuclear-related scenarios in the past, but the Rapid Reflection Force large scale exercise organised in December last year involving a fictitious nuclear incident, quickly called the top leaders' attention to the fact that new dynamics were in play

photo: Mediatheque / EDF / Beaucardet William

The force initially comprised a dozen members, selected on the basis of their capacity to remain creative under intense pressure. The RRF tested its mettle in the course of two exercises, dealing with pandemic and nuclear-related scenarios (September and October respectively) and proved to be not only useful, but truly essential for upper-echelon leaders. It enabled them to remain focused on their strategic role, ie eschew the tendency to be swamped by tactical-technical matters and micro-management. Through strategic advice, as well as very specific propositions, the RRF provided new traction and leverage in the face of situations that typically deny organisations any real control over chaotic dynamics.

In the wake of these two initial exercises, the 'top four' echelon at EDF confirmed that the RRF had become an 'essential' tool, and even announced a new policy: "No crisis management without the RRF."

One year on, the RRF has matured into more than just a promising concept. The learning curve has been steep, and the practicalities of this innovation have been refined. But the RRF is much more than an organisational success story. More to the point, it has shown itself to be a seminal concept in approaching the *terra incognitae* that are modern crises. The RRF arguably holds a crucial answer to the question raised by the US House of Representatives in its report on Hurricane Katrina, namely: "Why do we seem to be continuously one disaster behind?" It lays the groundwork for a new culture, new operational 'grammars', and – last but not least – new networking capabilities when the name of the game is partnership, collective innovation and resilience. The new cartography of risk and crises that we are called upon to develop requires new beacons and charting instruments: the RRF is a good place to start.

In 2007, the RRF was convened on several occasions in real life situations and in training exercises. The conclusions reached in 2006 were upheld, as the RRF continued to prove invaluable. So much so, in fact, that the RRF is now not seen as an

outside add-on to organisational coping mechanisms, but as an underpinning for EDF's entire crisis management architecture.

Over a seven-month period, (in August and November 2006, and then again in February 2007), one of EDF's nuclear plants (Chinon) was hit by a cluster of tragic events, as three of its employees committed suicide. Though this did not happen on the premises of the plant itself, this apparent 'cluster' mushroomed into an internal and public issue, all the more so as it had eerie similarities with recent occurrences within other French companies, whose initial reaction had been to underline that suicide was an individual act, which therefore entailed no specific responsibility from the industry.

RAISING QUESTIONS

EDF decided immediately to act differently. Pierre Bérroux, in his capacity as Chief Risk Manager, instead raised a first crucial question: "What is the essence of the problem?" He quickly agreed on a common, basic paradigm with the two other authors of this paper (who at the time were in New Orleans), and EDF's other members of the RRF. This paradigm was to: Avoid an over-hasty or dryly technical response; and eschew narrowly legalistic postures, which would only have caused more disarray and more loss of confidence.

The suggestion was made – and accepted by the CE level – that the real answer to such deep-rooted turbulence was not, in fact, an answer, but an attitude; that the company's posture should not be, yet again, top-down or magisterial ("let me tell you..."), but should demonstrate a willingness to listen, and then to act. Specifically, a mission was set up at the CE level, under the leadership of two high-level officials – Pierre Bérroux, and a Human Resources (HR) manager – described as personal representatives of the Chairman. The principles of complete respect and in-depth listening were fully endorsed by all.

The RRF remained involved at all stages of the process, working hard to analyse situations, open up ideas, and suggest courses of action. At the plant, the delegation excluded no one; it aimed not to explain, but to listen and try to understand. This openness helped clear the air which the issue had threatened to poison, as employees were given a chance to dwell on traditionally 'taboo' subjects, such as organisational pressure. Just as the problem at hand was serious, so it was considered and analysed seriously, enabling a global dynamic for change, improvement and healing.

The point here is not to draw a rosy picture of the RRF's work. The types of challenges that

it is meant to confront do not allow for quick fixes. The ambition is not, or cannot be, to put our finger on 'the' magic formula, but – more modestly and more responsibly – to create conditions and avenues for improvement. The point is not to appear successful, but to be wise.

This same spirit and method was used in another crisis: a risk of regional blackout which lasted from December 2006 to February 2007, and during a very sensitive

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period, Christmas. The challenge posed by this incident, as the RRF underlined, was for EDF to rise above a simple 'name and blame' response and to instead focus on leadership and crisis resolution empowerment.

In September 2007, a very ambitious simulation exercise was held by EDF, based on the scenario of a breakdown in information systems. The 'fog of war' was very dense indeed: it was unclear whether the event was due to a national terrorist attack or merely to a localised disruption. This raised a serious challenge for the CE level, as the appropriate posture would differ dramatically depending on how the situation was interpreted. The RRF proved invaluable in helping the upper echelon make sense of the resulting 'funny war'.

It was essential to weigh both possibilities very carefully; no ready-made tool-kit could provide a technical answer, or determine the appropriate communication strategy. The RRF was the first to understand that the situation was not a case of global terror, but was owing to insufficient protection at a single site – a conclusion which called for a specific communication strategy.

In December 2007, a second large-scale exercise was organised, involving, this time, a (fictitious) nuclear incident. EDF had, of course, trained on many nuclear-related scenarios in the past, but the RRF quickly called the top leaders' attention to the fact that here, new dynamics were at play.

Over the years, EDF had developed a habit of tackling such situations initially through a technical response (in the very first hours), before turning its attention to

public communication (some hours later). But now the scenario at hand would clearly trigger immediate disruption among the wider public: addressing its concerns could not wait until technical issues had been resolved.

More surprisingly, communication itself had changed radically. For years, the norm in crisis communication had been to prepare the initial communiqué, followed by a media briefing, and high-profile TV interviews, especially in nationally-televised newscasts. Now, however, the internet has hanged the rules of the game. Again, the RRF was crucial to the response as it helped the CE representative and the communication team to build a strategic response that reflected the new challenges.

Generic lessons have emerged from all of this. On the one hand, it is now clear that the RRF can play a crucial role. But on the other hand it cannot, and should not, replace other functions: neither operations nor communication, nor least of all an organisation's strategic team. This suggests where the goalposts are to be set: everyone within the crisis platform should be trained to take full advantage of the RRF, but they must also retain their own crucial mission.

The reality tests and exercises underlined two imperatives. First of all, RRF members should undergo new training continually. Crises today grow more and more complex and surprising. Preparation must adapt in consequence, with a crucial warning: "Never fight the last war."

This electricity pylon was destroyed by a hurricane. The RRF was implemented specifically to tackle crises like this more effectively

photo: Mediatheque / EDF / Arduin Thierry



► Therefore, a new special training programme was created which combines both teaching (lessons drawn from recent on-site case studies at worldwide level), and simulations confronting very difficult and 'strange' scenarios.

The second imperative is that each team working in the crisis centre should be given specific preparation to improve its capacity to interact with the RRF. A programme is now underway creating an operational tool-kit on unthinkable crises, or even conventional crises that suddenly mutate into inconceivable events. A DVD will be available by this March, combining basic texts, slides, and short videos aimed at heightening the viewer's awareness of these issues and to prod them to modify their approaches.

In addition, specific sessions for each group (operations, communication and leadership) should be held to cultivate the necessary change in dynamics.

The key outcome, to date, has been a near-universal acknowledgement that critical improvements are required. Even the best practices developed over the last decades must be revisited – and all agree that the RRF can help this happen.

Today's crises tend to overwhelm traditional crisis management mechanisms and organisational frameworks. In so doing, they trigger 'stun effects', as even trusted best practice becomes outmoded. In this context, it is crucial that teams and individuals in charge feel that their organisation includes a group of people devoted to precisely addressing such impossible challenges, and available to help where and when needed – all the while trusting that their own role is not undermined in the process.

PILLAR OF STRENGTH

Real life incidents and exercises have shown that the RRF can genuinely become a pillar of strength around which an organisation can coalesce. The RRF can benefit all. On a global scale, it can help an entire organisation develop strength, coherence, stability, and strategic intelligence, and thereby address the most difficult – and increasingly frequent – challenges of our turbulent times. The RRF is also a steady driver for benchmarking, partnerships, and shared initiatives.

The crucial issue at stake was underlined by the White House Report on Hurricane Katrina: "Our current system for homeland security does not provide the necessary framework to manage the challenges posed by 21st century catastrophic threats."

Our cartography of risks and crises is



The EDF crisis room in action during a pandemic crisis exercise. The RRF tested its mettle in the course of two exercises, dealing with pandemic and nuclear-related scenarios, and proved itself not only to be useful, but truly essential for upper-echelon leaders

outdated. Our best practice still lags one war behind. Unfortunately, official reports often do little more than string together a litany of recommendations that call for more of the same. Such conventional thinking is not the way to confront emerging risks and crises.

Granted, it is now fashionable to call for new public-private partnerships, for benchmarking, for more communication and more simulation exercises. But we are far from the conceptual revolution which would turn these mantras into more than empty slogans. Many people seem vaguely aware that this is not enough, that a *terra incognita* somehow lies beyond old and outmoded approaches.

The RRF is a gateway into this unknown area, a new instrument to begin charting emerging risks and crises, and the appropriate responses. This is because it focuses on questions, on creativity, rather than on ready-made answers. It calls for, and elicits, the sharing of questions, intuitions, and open-minded approaches. It concentrates on flagging specific ways out, not on the absurd ambition to develop global, final answers. Those are no longer attainable – if they ever were – in today's chaotic environment.

This capacity to provide a pillar of strength that doubles up as a signpost explains why so many officials – private and public, French and international – have now expressed their interest in the RRF, fully aware that it is more than a just another tool, another best practice. With increasing frequency, many have asked to come and see the RRF at work

during simulation exercises for themselves.

The RRF has also proven to be a stimulus for high-level meetings on an international scale, through its attractiveness as a promising new avenue to grasping and confronting emerging issues of global import. It was one of the focal points of a seminar held by the Johns Hopkins University's Center for Transatlantic Relations in Washington, in March 2007, and again during the international seminar on emerging crises convened by Morocco's government in Casablanca in May of that year.

The RRF initiative is also the cornerstone of another recently launched initiative with critical operators (from the banking, transportation, telecommunication and water sectors) in France, with the aim of setting up a European partnership to tackle the most difficult issues related to crisis management in a chaotic world.

In a nutshell, the RRF has shown itself to be much more than the organisational add-on to crisis cells that had initially been envisioned. It is, in fact, a rare lifeline in today's emerging environment of risks and crises. In this sense, it has undoubtedly gone far beyond expectations. It now behoves us to look forward and build upon this cornerstone. In the authors' opinion, the best means to do so is to open new avenues for co-operation, be it with academia, experts, or leaders, with the crucial support of EDF. This article will have fulfilled its objective if it brings us any closer to this goal.

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